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Author(s): Caroline Fletcher

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Adult Reflections on Being an 'Only-Child'

Caroline Fletcher

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research project explores the significance that individual counsellors attach to being an 'only-child' in terms of their development in childhood, their adult lives and their work as counsellors. The academic literature tends to deal with the advantages and disadvantages of growing up without siblings. Yet, for this researcher, these studies seem to diminish the unique lived experience of individuals and almost to perpetuate stereotypes – even when they seek to challenge existing negative stereotypes by positing new, more favourable stereotypes.

Four experienced counsellors were interviewed about the impact that being an only-child has had – and continues to have – on their lives and were invited to reflect on their own reactions to the stereotypes. My research indicates that the stereotypes bear little relation to the lived-experience of the participants. It also concludes that the process of becoming a counsellor has helped the participants to understand the part that being an only-child has played in the complex picture of their overall development. For all participants, this awareness seems to be an important aspect of their work as counsellors.

Declaration

This work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

Signed:

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This work is dedicated to Kevin and Patrick and to the memory of my late parents, Hazel and Bill.

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Chapter One

Introduction

What is it like to go through life as an only-child? How does this single biographical fact shape people's lives and the way in which they view the world? My central research question is: for counsellors who are only-children, how has the experience of growing up without siblings affected their view of themselves, their relationships, and their approach to counselling practice? In this qualitative study, I aim to explore the lived experience of being an only-child, trying to understand the thoughts and feelings of individuals as they reflect upon what being an only-child means to them. I aim to discover the personal meanings that those individuals attach to their experience.

My study poses a number of supplementary questions to the central research question, including: what impact do stereotypes and external assumptions about only-children have on the self-concept? I also explore connections between only-child experience and counselling. While looking for common themes, I have tried to capture the 'essence' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) of the experience and to honour the uniqueness and complexity of individual lives.

McLeod (2011,p.182) talks of the personal nature of qualitative research. In my study, the choice of topic, as well as the approach, is essentially personal: I am an only-child, daughter of an only-child and the mother of an only-child. As I trained to become a counsellor, the 'only-child' element of my personal history came into sharper focus. It was part of an unfolding process of increasing self-knowledge and

self-awareness that is 'integral' (Rose, 2012) to counsellor training. This personal development aspect of my training (something that Johns (2012) describes as equally important or more important than professional development) led me to question its meaning more deeply.

Rogers (1961) talks of the tension between the internal and external locus of evaluation and I wondered about the meaning of external evaluation for only-children when the identity of 'only-child' is the subject of external assumptions and generalisations that seem to ossify into stereotypes (Falbo, 2012). Does this hinder the nurturing of what Rogers describes as the 'organismic self'? It certainly seemed to be connected to my own reluctance to admit to others the fact that I was an only-child, and to a defensiveness that persisted despite my perception that external assumptions were wide of the mark. It seemed like an altogether misplaced sense of shame and I wanted to explore further what the personal experience (and external evaluations or stereotypes) had meant for others who had been brought up and continue to live without siblings. I came to believe that trying to understand the real lived-experience of those who grew up without siblings was in itself a valid and fruitful subject for psychological research as *"an attempt to understand more adequately the human condition as it manifests itself in lived, concrete experience"* (Spinelli, 2005. p.131).

This dissertation, therefore, aims to explore in depth the personal lived experience of counsellors who are only-children and to reach an understanding of what it means for each individual to be an only-child – hoping that the exploration will, in some way and to some extent, offer a further insight into the human condition. I hope, too, that capturing the essence of this experience might challenge some of the formulaic, socially conditioned ideas about only-children.

Chapter Two

What the Literature Says

2.1 First searches

Reviewing the literature on this topic was a process that was ‘fundamental’ (Hart, 1998, p.26) to my research project in order to provide it with a framework and academic context. I used books, articles and online searching databases available through Chester University (PsychINFO, PsychArticles and Psychbooks), starting with search terms connected with ‘only-child’. I was surprised at the sheer volume of literature available, much of it generated by research on the effects of China’s ‘one child policy’ and an ensuing debate about the implications of this policy for Chinese society and future generations.

Because of the initial results and my own perception of some prejudice around the idea of the only-child, the second stage was to search against ‘only-child’ and ‘stereotypes’. Stereotyping is defined in the Dictionary of Psychology (Cardwell, 1996) as *“a fixed, over-generalised belief about a particular group or class of people”* and by Scherer (1992) as *“ill-founded categorizations often with a negative bias”*. The early results of my searches quickly confirmed my expectation that the only-child and stereotyping would be inextricably linked in the existing literature: beliefs certainly seemed to be ‘fixed’ and ‘over-generalised’. I also noted that debate about the ‘one child policy’ seemed to reinforce and magnify existing stereotypes: ‘little emperors’ (Falbo, 1994) had become another unflattering soubriquet for only-children. Such a momentous social change justified looking again at only-children in order to evaluate the likely advantages and disadvantages in terms of their personal and social development. It was almost a licence for sociologists to generalise. Only-

children became topical and a category apart – a category labelled ‘problem’ or ‘potential problem’. This initial searching strengthened my motivation to carry out a qualitative study exploring the unique perceptions of adult only-children about their experience. It also created a sense of conflict about the objectives of my own project: would the search for themes inevitably lead to more generalisation?

2.2 Origins of stereotyping

Negative stereotyping can be traced back to an American psychologist, G. Stanley Hall (1907, quoted in Stein,1995) who described being an only-child as ‘a disease in itself’. In 1922, the psychologist, A.A. Brill warned of a pre-disposition to neuroticism in only-children, and, going further, said: “*It would be best for the individual and the race that there were no only-children*” (cited in Falbo, 1984). Donald Winnicott (pbd.1957), in a lecture given in 1945, talked of the ‘immeasurable disadvantages’ of growing up without siblings (although he also stated that, if these are understood, they can be got around to some extent and he even finds some value in the possibility of an uncomplicated infancy). Winnicott (1957) also points to the capacity to be alone (in which an only-child is likely to have some practice) as an aspect of emotional maturity.

The most prevalent stereotype, of being ‘pampered’ and ‘spoiled’ – the recipient of undiluted attention from parents - seems to originate largely from the work of Alfred Adler (1962) on the significance of birth order on children's overall development (see chart overleaf).

<i>Position</i>	<i>Family Situation</i>	<i>Child's characteristics</i>
<i>ONLY</i>	<p>Birth is a miracle. Parents have no previous experience.</p> <p>Retains 200% attention from both parents.</p> <p>May become rival of one parent. Can be over-protected and spoiled.</p>	<p>Likes being the centre of adult attention.</p> <p>Often has difficulty sharing with siblings and peers.</p> <p>Prefers adult company and uses adult language.</p>

Adlerian Overview of Birth Order Characteristics

Developed by Henry T. Stein of Alfred Adler Institutes of San Francisco & Northwestern Washington

May, 2008

Generalised characteristics were attributed to all birth orders, but the less positive tendencies identified by Adler (1962) in eldest, middle or youngest children do not seem to have become entrenched in popular perception in the same way as those in respect of only-children.

Wang and Aarnodt (cited in Newman, 2008), talk of 'source amnesia' in the formation and duration of stereotypes - meaning that the distilled message of an

inquiry or research project will, if memorable enough, linger out of context and even in the face of contradictory evidence. Messages about only children have proved powerful and enduring. In their study of stereotyping, Hippel et al. (1994) point out that stereotypes provide perceivers with background information so that they do not pay as much attention to the individual. This seems to go to the heart of the insidious kind of depersonalisation involved in categorisation. In the case of only-children, I think that this means that they may frequently meet an unconscious social schema (Fiske, 1993) in others; a kind of short cut to understanding.

Many quantitative researchers have offered other undesirable qualities of the only child such as unsociable behaviour (Claudy, 1984), egocentrism (Jiao et al., 1986) and even a disproportionately high incidence of mental health problems (Howe & Madgett, 1975). It would seem that such works have been influential in perpetuating some fairly unflattering stereotypes and negative cultural assumptions.

If a 'stereotype' seemed inherently negative as a concept, I wondered about 'archetype', which seemed possibly more nuanced and more positive. Defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "*a very typical example of a certain person or thing*", it seemed as if an archetype could be used as a kind of base for a more complex understanding of identity. Sorensen (2008, p.166) identifies themes that, according to her research, make up the only child archetype:

- lack of connectedness
- liveness and space;
- specialness;
- self-esteem;
- lack of sibling opportunities;
- triangular relationships;
- enmeshment;
- separation and individuation;
- the effect of the only-child stereotype; and

- shame.

On her website, Richardson (1998) offers a positive archetype based on the only-child being: 'independent, capable, reliable, a good friend to others, sensitive, thoughtful, considerate, organised and responsible'. Both Sorensen and Richardson offer more searching and layered ideas, but I was still unsure whether an archetype of the only-child is any more illuminating than a stereotype. I have come to the conclusion that there is no helpful distinction between them.

2.3 The continuing debate

Toni Falbo (1984) has been prominent in seeking to counter some of the negative publicity for only-children with her own quantitative research. Her findings suggest that singletons are, broadly speaking, no different from children with siblings in terms of adjustment, character, sociability, achievement and self-esteem – except that they tend to score higher in self-esteem, intelligence and achievement (Falbo & Polit 1986). She has also joined the debate (Falbo, 1994) about the social implications of China's one child policy. According to Falbo's overview of the research (2012), many of the findings suggested that any differences were minor and, where there were differences, the comparisons were in fact favourable to only-children.

Ostensibly, her research offers comfort for the only-child as it denies any disadvantageous difference. Yet, the advantageous findings for only-children still seem to be adding to the generalisations and the tendency to treat the only-child as a class apart.

Mancillas (2006, p.268) identifies the need to challenge old beliefs and labels - that the only child is 'lonely, spoiled and maladjusted' - and urges mental health professionals, teachers and parents to make 'unbiased' decisions about only-

children. Rosenberg & Hyde (1993, p.269) refute the old negative stereotypes, saying that only-children are 'not a homogenous category'. I felt disappointed that they then go on to identify 'three distinct sub-categories or types of only-child'. Categorisation still seems to be irresistible and, it seems to me, to illustrate just how deep-seated these stereotypes are.

Professor Judy Dunn (2002) casts doubt upon the negative findings of much of the research. Her own research shows that there isn't any real difference between the social adjustment of only-children and that of those with siblings. She believes that it is tenuous to make an equation between a child's ability to get on with his/her contemporaries and whether s/he has siblings. The environmentalist, Bill McKibben (1999), who made the choice to have a single child for environmental reasons, argues that cultural stereotypes around the only-child are false, adding his voice to the argument that, essentially, only-children are very much the same as anyone else.

2.4 Voices of only-children

Somewhat discouraged by the underlying premise of much of the research, I wanted to hear from some only-children themselves – only-children talking about their experience rather than being the subject of analysis. I found two websites devoted to being an only-child: *onlychild.org.uk* and *beinganonly.com*. The latter seems to have fallen out of use but the former is active, offering a forum for adult only-children to share their richly varied stories throughout the life-span. My searches also revealed numerous press articles written by 'onlies' recounting their own experiences, but, again, all placed firmly in the context of negative assumptions about only-children. Consequently, the writers set out (sometimes humorously, sometimes bitterly or sadly, often positively and defensively) to tell their stories to

illustrate why being an only-child was a good or a bad thing. Just a few of the many titles give a flavour:

'Only need not mean lonely' (Blinkhorn & Shah, 2005)

'The lifelong pain of being a lonely only' (Murray, 2013)

'Advice for only-children: invent a sibling so you can pass for normal' (Archer, 2012)

'Yes, I'm an only-child and, no, I'm not depressed – or beastly' (Gillan, 2013)

Each individual's story seemed somehow overshadowed (and weakened) by a stated or implicit desire to prove or disprove some received ideas.

Ironically, a study devoted to interviewing over sixty only-children in depth (Pitkeathley & Emerson, 1994) seemed to me to perpetuate and solidify stereotypical thinking. Interesting and moving reflections of interviewees are contained within a glib narrative of overcoming problems – a kind of self-help for only-children complete with useful tips for partners in 'how to cope with the situation' – the 'situation' being the perceived faults and idiosyncrasies of the only-child. An example (by no means unrepresentative) will perhaps illustrate the tone: *"Don't be afraid to point out to your partner times when he is being self-centred. (Most only-children are very worried about this, and keen to correct it if they can.)"* (Pitkeathley & Emerson, 1994) That the authors of this work are themselves only-children seems only to deepen the irony of the powerful categorisation at work in this book.

Another only-child and founder of *onlychild.org.uk*, Bernice Sorensen (2008), writes very differently about her own qualitative research into only-children, dealing tentatively with themes that emerge: a sense of something missing, feelings of difference and separateness. Her exploration of the subject and acknowledgement

of distinctive experiences of only-children seem qualitatively different – empathic rather than evaluative.

2.5 Defined by absence

“Absence is a large presence.” (A.C.Grayling, 2002, p.166)

Sartre (1956) talks about things that are absent being as important as those that are present in defining who we are and how we see the world. An only-child is defined in a very literal way by what is missing – defined by the absence of siblings. He or she misses the opportunity to develop psychosocial skills (Dunn & Slomoski, 1992), emotional support (Brody, 1998) and learning opportunities (Adler, 1998) to name but a few ‘absences’.

Parental presence and attention seems to be prominent in the literature – usually as the source of perceived problems; *“like sunshine through a magnifying glass...can warm until it burns* (Sandler, 2011). I wondered if it could sometimes compensate for the absence of siblings. Not according to Coles (2003), for whom parental attention is only half the story; the absence of siblings is a crucial gap in the emotional life of a child. In a family of one child and two parents, the child is in the minority which may tend to result in that child becoming a ‘little adult’ (Sorensen, 2008, p.21), growing up too soon and missing out on the freedom simply to be a child. The same power imbalance is, presumably, likely to be at play in a household of only one adult and one child, with the child likely to be absorbed into the world of the adult.

Besides the company of peers within the home, only-children miss out on important opportunities to rehearse some of the more complicated aspects of relationships within (usually) a safe environment. The sheer complexity of sibling relationships

can in itself be valuable as “a way of learning to love and hate the same person” (Mitchell, 2003, p.225). As Dorothy Rowe (2007) points out, for most people, sibling relationships - described as ‘painful, wonderful and extraordinary’ - are likely to be the longest lasting relationships of their lives. Only-children never experience these peculiarly rich and complex relationships, and also miss out on important witnesses and sources of validation throughout the course of their lives.

2.6 Counselling

As an only-child counsellor, Sorensen (2008, p.204) identifies validation as an important aspect of her work with clients who are only-children: *“This is what I offer as a therapist and researcher: the importance of existential validation of the onliness in the lives of only-children.”* This seems important to me: that a significant element of an adult client’s life – the ‘onliness’ – should be explored and acknowledged and that this kind of witnessing may, in some small way, compensate for the missing siblings who, in addition to their many other roles, act as witnesses in the life course.

I feel less attracted by her use of an archetype (above, 2.2) to identify issues that an only-child client is likely to bring to counselling. It doesn’t seem to sit well with the person-centred approach and seems conducive to a kind of bias or predisposition, something Stewart (2004) calls the ‘Aha’ phenomenon that can lead a clinician to interpret selectively based on ideas about birth order. Stewart gave therapists identical vignettes about a client that differed only in respect of the client’s supposed birth order; his study found that therapist assumptions about the client were heavily influenced by archetypal ideas about a particular birth order. I wonder whether such assumptions threaten to undermine the entire counselling relationship. It seems to be at odds with the idea of entering a client’s frame of reference and the ‘as-if’ quality

of empathic sensitivity that Mearns & Thorne (2013, p.57) describe as 'crucial' to the professionalism of the counsellor. This leads me back to the archetypes put forward by Sorensen and Richardson (above, 2.2). Both are counsellors who offer their theories of archetypes as helpful for understanding only-child clients. This approach seems related to the use of personality tests (such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator) in counselling as an aid to understanding clients. Douglas (2010, p.34) states that these stable views of personality – which lead to categorisations of personality disorder – are giving way to a postmodern view of personality as “more fluid, intersubjective and embedded in relationship”. Perhaps this postmodern approach can extend to the only-child who has long been identified and discussed in terms of a fixed personality type.

2.7 Summary

I feel that the literature on the subject provides quite a narrow, enclosed context for my research. There are some distinctive, personal voices expressing feelings and thoughts about what it means to be an only-child. Yet those voices seem almost to be drowned in the clamour of those seeking to pass judgment on or to defend the only-child as a type. The literature seems almost stifling in the way it is pulled back irresistibly to the subject of stereotypes and the debate about whether, in crude terms, the only-child is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing. I hope to make a more personal contribution rooted in concrete experience.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Philosophical context

This is a qualitative research project (or 'qualitative inquiry') and, as such, aims (in however small a way) to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed (McLeod, 2011). According to McLeod (McLeod, 2011, p.2), the belief that the world is 'constructed', implies that *"we inhabit a social, personal and relational world that is complex, layered and can be viewed from different perspectives"*. The approach is, therefore, phenomenological, striving to *"describe the essence of everyday experience"* (McLeod, 2011) and the meaning that events have for individuals (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). It is in line with what Crotty (cited in McLeod, 2011) describes as the new, empirical phenomenology - as opposed to the mainstream phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (as cited in McLeod - 2011, p.52) in that it is looking to find a truth rather than the truth.

Phenomenology as a methodological approach to research has strong roots in existential philosophy and I have included an existential perspective in this research. Existentialism deals with what are sometimes called the four givens of existence: *death* – we know it is inevitable and yet we want to avoid it; *freedom* – which carries an obligation to assume responsibility for ourselves; *isolation* – we are alone in the world and yet crave contact with others; and *meaninglessness* – the need to create our own meaning in our lives (Yalom, 1980, pp.8-9). Facing up to isolation and responsibility, in particular, seemed likely to be fruitful bases for exploring only-child experience.

As a (novice) qualitative researcher, I am looking for meaning in the lived experience rather than seeking a definitive truth. And the search is personal. Any knowledge acquired must be truly 'self-acquired' (Husserl, 1960), completely independent of assumptions and received wisdom. Schopenhauer (1970) states that if a truth or insight is to be found it will be found only by truly thinking for yourself so that any conclusions *"bear the hue, colour and stamp of your whole manner of thinking"*.

So, if knowledge is to be truly self-acquired, it seems important to approach the chosen subject with a kind of clean slate. McLeod states that all qualitative researchers, whether consciously or not, will use Husserl's procedures such as *"bracketing-off assumptions, horizontalisation, careful and exhaustive description, searching for the essence of the phenomenon"* (McLeod, 2011, p.50). Moustakas (1994, p.33) talks of 'epoche' in which *"the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure and transcendental ego"*.

Reaching a "vantage point of a pure and transcendental ego" sounded like quite a challenge..... Indeed, in some ways, is that aim at odds with the inherent subjectivity of phenomenology? Is it unrealistic to expect the researcher to remove him or herself completely from the phenomenological world s/he is exploring? Spinelli (2005) seems to think it is impossible for the researcher to exclude him/herself from the thing that is being investigated: *"...we are all enmeshed in an inevitable and influential matrix of inter-relations"*. Heidegger (1962/1927), also observed that bracketing can only ever be partially achieved and any interpretation will be founded essentially upon the "foreconception". That is to say that the data is filtered through the prior experiences, assumptions, preconceptions of the analyst – try as we might to approach the subject in a state of intellectual purity.

If the very act of interpretation is subjective, how then can that subjectivity or the self be best used? Even “intuition” – described by Husserl as “the presence to consciousness of all essence” - can be a welcome part of the process.

Schleiermacher (Smith et al., 2009) describes interpretation as *“craft or art involving the combination of a range of skills, including intuition”*. This seems to go much further than merely accepting that true objectivity can never be achieved. He claims that intuition allows us *“to offer insights which exceed and subsume the explicit claims of our participants”*.

I feel uneasy at the prospect of my own intuition exceeding and subsuming the claims of participants, no matter how strong I may feel my intuition to be. It seems at odds with a person-centred approach. Yet, it is perhaps the language that is off-putting rather than the reality as I fully accept both the importance of interpretation and the use of self (reflexivity) within the research process. Kim Etherington describes reflexivity as more than self-awareness: *“it creates a dynamic process of interaction within and between ourselves and our participants, and the data that inform decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages of research”* (Etherington, 2006, p.36). I hope that this dynamic process of interaction has found some expression in this research enquiry.

3.2 Sampling

I decided to select my sample participants ‘purposively’, on the basis that they would grant me access *“to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study”* (Smith, et al, 2009, p.49). I wanted to interview participants who had at least reached mid-life. The age criterion was imposed not because I wanted participants to be at the same stage on ‘the journey from cradle to grave’. Rather, I wanted them to have

lived long enough to have experienced being an only-child at different stages of their lives and, particularly, a fairly long period of being an 'only-child' as an adult. I felt that this would enable the participants to view the subject with some perspective, although I realise that this perhaps added to the complexity of the task, as the memory is asked to scan a number of different eras and to incorporate them into a present sense of their significance.

The other stipulation for 'my' only-children was that they should be qualified counsellors. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, I felt that counsellors would be likely to have already reflected on what being an only-child has meant for them, through the personal development work that usually forms a large part of counsellor training. Secondly, and more importantly, I was interested to explore what links there might be between being an only-child and being a counsellor or, at least, what connections the participants might make.

3.3 Data collection

Smith et al. (2009, p.51) suggest between three and six participants for a student project using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I decided to look for four participants. I approached this in a fairly informal way by giving my advert (Appendix 1) to colleagues and acquaintances in the counselling world and also displaying the advert in my counselling placements. Through this kind of 'word of mouth' process, I managed to enrol four participants who were experienced and practising counsellors. There was no need to select or limit participants as, through my informal route, I looked no further when I found four volunteers.

I interviewed my four participants, trying to enter each one's phenomenological world, exploring their different stories and their own sense of the significance of

being an only-child in the way those stories have unfolded and continue to unfold. I explored connections between counsellor training and only-child experience. I thought that these connections might have implications for counsellor training - and I was not aware of any study that had considered this. I hoped, too, that the research might contribute to the self-awareness of other counsellors who are only-children. At the same time, I hoped that a truly phenomenological, person-centred approach could counter any tendency to categorise, and that I could maintain a distinction between identifying themes and making generalised conclusions.

I interviewed three of the participants in their homes, the fourth in her place of work and each setting complied with privacy requirements. The participants signed the consent form for audio recording (Appendix 2). Each interview was digitally recorded for transcription.

Using semi-structured interviews, I tried to make the structure as loose as possible to allow each individual's reflections to flow freely, capturing what was personally significant for them. The subjects I wanted to explore through the lens of being an only-child were:

- Relationship with parents
- Awareness of stereotypes
- Self-concept
- Relationships with others
- Ideas about family
- Counselling

I set out some fairly long, open-ended questions (as areas for reflection which participants were invited to read before the interview):

1. Describe your relationship with your parents as you grew up? How was this relationship affected by the fact that you were an only-child? Did you wish that you had siblings? How did you develop social and emotional relationships

with other children? What was your awareness of external perceptions (and negative stereotypes) of the 'only-child'? What is your adult sense of and reaction to negative stereotypes of the only-child?

2. How do you feel that the experience of growing up without siblings affected your development of a self-concept?
3. In thinking about your relationships as an adult, what significance do you attach to the fact that you were raised as an only-child? What personal qualities (positive and negative) do you attribute to the fact that you were raised as an only-child? As an adult, do you wish that you had siblings?
4. How do you think your ideas about the concept of family have been informed by the fact of being an only-child?
5. Have there been times in counselling sessions (either as counsellor or client) when the fact of being an only-child (either counsellor or client) has been directly in your awareness or even played a part in the dialogue?

During the interview, the questions were used in a 'flexible' way (Smith et al., 2009, p.64). They were almost a backdrop used selectively as prompts while I followed each participant's 'flow' as far as possible. Adopting a person-centred approach, I tended to follow each interviewee's own sense of emotional engagement and interest in the subject, rather than sticking rigidly to a number of questions asked in a particular order. The defined areas were, to a greater or lesser extent, included, but the shape and tone of each interview seemed to be quite different, quite distinctive. Smith et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of establishing rapport with participants. Perhaps understandably, it was in my first interview that I felt some unease. Initially, I felt that the participant thought I was looking for a particular 'angle' rather than simply wanting to hear what she had to say; but I think that I managed to correct that impression over the course of our meeting. Subsequent interviews felt more free-flowing.

3.4 Participants

Adam is in his late forties, married with three children. He was brought up by both parents, with whom he had an easy relationship. Remembering a comfortable, secure childhood – ‘like a flat plane’ – he is nevertheless aware of missing out on some of the ‘camaraderie’ and ‘chaos’ of family life.

Suzanne is in her early sixties, divorced with three adult children. Her parents split up when she was two and she was brought up principally by her mother. She described feelings of loneliness in childhood and a longing for siblings.

Christine is in her early fifties, single with no children. Brought up by both parents, she recalls a happy, ‘fun-filled’ childhood. This strong base made her feel ‘grounded’, able to function in groups yet able, also, to be on her own. As an adult, she has perhaps more sense of being an only-child and what that means for her.

Rachel is in her late fifties, divorced with two adult children, living with her long-term partner. She was brought up by her mother without knowing her father. Her memories of childhood seem to be suffused with a sense of absence – ‘the missing mother’. She struggled with feelings of loneliness, boredom and a sense of being different.

3.5 Analysis

Interviews completed, I was conscious of the need to enter as fully as possible the personal worlds of my participants and to become immersed in their experience (Mintz, 2010). I listened repeatedly to the tapes and found that I could then ‘hear’ each voice quite clearly as I read (and re-read) the transcripts of the interviews. This process was rewarding and revealing – and I would like to have extended this period

of 'in-dwelling', but time was against me. McLeod (2011, p.35) says that "*a convincing conceptualisation of the material may takeperhaps as long as two years*".

The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). I began the process of identifying broad themes and then sub-themes in each text. I was then able to look again at the individual texts in the context of all four texts. There was a constant moving "back and forth between the part and the whole" (McLeod, 2011, p.27) known as the 'hermeneutic circle' as well as a process of interpretation and reinterpretation. A rather vague and elusive sense of the 'shape' of the project began to emerge. One particular difficulty lay with my sense of a responsibility to do justice to each rich and distinctive account, a strong awareness of a need to capture the 'truth' of each participant's experience. There seemed to be a tension between this and the need to identify similarities or themes. I wondered if a single case study might have allowed for greater depth and textual analysis. In this, I reflected on the irony (in the context of a study on the only-child) of thinking that it might be more rewarding to concentrate on one participant rather than four....

I also considered narrative analysis as a possible way forward so that, instead of linking conceptual themes, I could focus on the "messiness, depth and texture of lived experience" (Etherington, 2006, p.80). However, it seemed as if IPA would do justice to the distinctiveness of each story.

3.6 Ethical issues

The project was carried out in accordance with ethical guidelines set out in the BACP Ethical Framework (Bond, 2004) and the University of Chester Research Governance Handbook. I tried to ensure that participants were fully informed about

their own role in the process so that they could be confident that their consent to participating was fully informed consent. The 'Information Sheet' (Appendix 3) set out the rights of participants and brief information about key ethical issues. And, importantly, assurance that ethical considerations would be kept in mind throughout the duration of the project.

Two main issues arose when I started the interviews. Firstly, my own sense of the importance of confidentiality and anonymity – separate but related issues – was heightened by one participant who placed particular emphasis on privacy. Privacy was an important theme in her upbringing and she is deeply committed to the concept in her counselling work. I was very aware that recounting her experience was an act of great trust and I hope that I have honoured that trust – and the trust of my other participants. However much a story is anonymised and confidentiality protected, I am conscious that it is an act of generosity to entrust that story to another and to surrender it to another's interpretation.

A second issue was that I had advertised for participants who were 'sufficiently grounded' in their experience to participate in the research, conscious of the principle of non-maleficence. It seemed to me that all participants were 'sufficiently grounded' in their experience in view of their years of professional experience. The fact that they would be having ongoing professional supervision was a further insurance against harm if sharing sensitive, personal information were to cause distress. It requires sensitivity, imagination and empathy in order to understand the potential impact of the process. Fontana and Frey (1994, p.373). state that *"most of traditional in-depth interviewing is unethical...The techniques and tactics are really ways of manipulating respondents while treating them as objects or numbers rather than individual human beings."* I acknowledge some discomfort around potential

objectification, discordant interpretation (for the participant) and an inevitable sense of ulterior motive – and the need for these issues to be handled carefully in accordance with ethical guidelines. That said, I believe that describing all in-depth interviewing as inherently unethical goes too far – and tends to diminish the autonomy and responsibility of participants to make up their own minds about involvement in research.

3.7 Reliability, validity and trustworthiness

McLeod (2011, p.84) discusses the difficulty of establishing validity in qualitative research (in comparison with quantitative research). He identifies the difficulty in ensuring that desirable abstract values of ‘accuracy’, ‘coherence’, ‘fertility’, ‘consistency’ and ‘simplicity’ are put into action. Stiles (1993) emphasises the importance of clarity of explication of methods, presenting sufficient evidence, and establishing credibility through ‘member checks’ as key factors in achieving reliability and validity. He also mentions ‘permeability’ as an important factor – that is to say, evidence of the researcher’s openness to new insights. Rigorous attention to ethical issues and working within professional guidelines for research will establish a framework for valid or authentic research. It is also important to place the project within a context of existing research in order to establish its proper context. I have tried to adhere to these values but it has not been possible to follow all guidelines in a small scale project and, for example, I have not used any ‘member checks’. Finally, there is always the question of the interpretative part of IPA and the likelihood that the research will be “distorted by the individual fantasies and biases” of the researcher (McLeod, 2011, p.18). Some such distortion seems inherent in the selection and shaping involved in the research process.

In the research findings set out in the following chapter, in addition to analysing the stories told by each participant, I have tried to represent and to honour those stories, using their narratives as data through which to “access *their world*” (Etherington, 2004, p.80).

Chapter Four

Research Findings

The interviews yielded ‘rich data’ (Smith et al, 2009) in terms of the complexity, depth and diversity of the participants’ narratives. Time and word limitations made it impossible to explore many emergent themes: instead, I identified four main themes with subsequent sub-themes:

<u>Main theme</u>	<u>Main theme</u>	<u>Main theme</u>	<u>Main theme</u>
1.Parents	2.Missing siblings	3.Identity	4.Counselling
<u>Sub-themes</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
1.1 Attention	2.1 Being part of a group	3.1 Stereotypes	4.1 Training
1.2 Responsibility	2.2 Rivalry, conflict and other stereotypes 2.3 An adult world	3.2 Self-concept	4.2 Practice

4.1 Main theme 1: Parents

The relationship with parents was the starting point for each interview and was identified as a main theme with two sub-themes.

4.1.1. Sub-theme: Attention

Christine has the most positive memories of parental attention: *"I was a daddy's girl, my dad did all of the fun things..."; "...my mum was...the disciplinarian and my dad was more tactile than my mum..."; "...when I had a real problem in my life, I talked to my mum."* She felt *"a real closeness to both but very...very different..."; "...so, I felt I grew up quite grounded because I had everything from...both influences that wasn't diluted or ...you know, shared in a way that was detrimental to me."* She values the nurturing attention she received and seems to appreciate the fact that it did not have to be shared with siblings.

For Rachel, the picture was very different: *"....my mum, I guess was missing...in some ways because she was struggling as a single mum..."; "my mum was individuating which was like in teenage years, Erikson's stage five or whatever, that she was struggling with relationships, work, getting on at work....."; "...she was preoccupied perhaps through no fault of her own...with becoming the person she is or negotiating life..." "...I think she struggled with self-esteem and...schooling and that sort of thing, so I think my mum had sort of got by and then she was doing her thing, so it was that, maybe lack of connection, I don't know, I don't know."* Looking back, she seems to have had little sense of anyone paying her attention: *"...there was like....a gap of ...nothingness. I can remember my...it's the central theme is that lack of...I was very aware that I wasn't the focus.....and I think you want to be as a child."* She seems to have an acute sense of the absence of parental or adult attention and there is a yearning in her words: *"Why was this missing?"*

As a child, Susanne also seems to have enjoyed little nurturing or empathic attention from her parents, both of whom, for different reasons, seemed to lack emotional

attunement to her needs. She felt unable to say anything to her mother about a specific ‘heartbreaking’ experience that was ‘the end of the world’, about being bullied in a new school or about her general sense of loneliness and isolation: *“Even then I picked up that, if I told my mum, there would be no sympathy, no empathy...Keep it inside. Don’t say anything.”* Her father, too, seemed beyond her emotional reach. He was: *“very, very quiet....exceedingly quiet”*. Going to stay with him felt ‘very, very constrained’: *“...he was too insular and I used to get homesick.”*

Adam described an easy, harmonious relationship with his parents : *“We were a little group of three.”* However, within this small group, parental attention did not become too intense: *“I didn’t get the sense that I was the focus of everything for them and that they had all the expectations of me. I didn’t have any of that sense at all...”* The only-child generalisation does not fit, and Adam goes further: *“I felt almost the opposite – almost to the point in hindsight where I think we.., perhaps there should have been more pressure....”; “I was usually brought into some kind of discussion. So I remember that as being a good thing, but perhaps they should have pushed me into some things....”*

He does not describe the kind of ideal balance Christine perceived, but expresses quite a gentle, reflective sense of whether more pressure might have helped him – and he is left wondering about how the balance should be struck as he brings up his own children.

4.1.2. Sub-theme: Responsibility

In different ways, all participants expressed a strong sense of responsibility towards their parents in later life. Christine continued to feel driven to make her parents proud of her: *“And I always had that sense of whatever I try to do...I try to make them*

proud...” She has no children and talks of this in terms of disappointment for her parents: “I do think it’s such a shame that they never had grandchildren...because of me being an only-child and an only-child that was gay, you know, if I’d have had brothers and sisters, they’d have had that...” She links this, tentatively, to the desire to make them proud: “And whether that was me making up for not giving them grandchildren, I’m not particularly sure...”

There is a sense of wanting to protect her parents from all disappointment, including disappointment arising from her own ‘onliness’. A need to protect her father (by this time widowed and in bad health) from disappointment and disruption contributed to delay in ending her long-term relationship: *“...some of my friends who I spoke to about my relationship – ‘well, why are you still with her?’ So, they would never understand, ‘well, I don’t want to disappoint my dad.’”*

Adam felt a great sense of responsibility as an only child when his father died: *“...that was absolutely the...biggest driver for me, was that I kind of felt, there’s just me....”*

This drive of sole responsibility seemed to gather momentum - from making funeral arrangements to a kind of responsibility for his widowed mother’s happiness - *“an urge to somehow get it all neatly sorted somehow”*. He wanted to: *“.....make it better in some way and to fix it....’cause I guess in a way the triangle of you know...supportive adult, calm, whatever you want to say, but that was broken at that pointso maybe there was a deeper need for me to somehow make it all better.”* His words reflect a sense of longing, loss and helplessness as he tries ‘in some way’ and ‘somehow’ to make things better. Following his mother’s death (five days before the birth of Adam’s youngest son), Adam described a feeling of relief, mixed with all the other emotions experienced during a “*blurry time*”: *“The other thing that came with all of that was actually a sense of relief...you know, that these...this*

huge sense of responsibility...well, the only responsibility now is to get stuff sorted with houses and technical things rather than...a person.” He feels that, if he had siblings, he wouldn’t have felt “a complete sense of responsibility...that’s a big thing, I think....”

Susanne felt a responsibility for her mother’s loneliness in later years and was unable to resist her mother’s increasing possessiveness : *“...wanting to be involved in everything and making sure she was involved in everything and I couldn’t say no at that time, wanting to say no but I couldn’t.” “She’d come on the phone...it felt like hours, but she was lonely and I understood that.”* Like Adam, Susanne felt a kind of impotent compulsion to make her mother’s life better: *“...her feeling lonely and me coming up with all these suggestions. – go to this...could go to that, join the church, I’ll come with you. No.”* This difficult period, and her mother’s subsequent illness and death, highlighted, again, Susanne’s sense of loss around being an only-child: *“As an only-child – although I’ve got my children – it’s not like having a sibling when you can share it.”*

Rachel is the only participant who has a parent still alive. Her mother, now in her eighties, lives with Rachel and her partner. Rachel did not talk explicitly about feelings of responsibility towards her mother and yet she has assumed great practical responsibility by inviting her mother to live in her home. There seems to be an irony in the ‘missing mother’ of childhood now living in her adult daughter’s home. Her mother has expressed regret for not being there for Rachel as a child, but Rachel’s attitude seems to be one of acceptance and “a rueful humour”: *“She’s expressed guilt and regret that she wasn’t there with me at that young age...but no-one can do anything about that now.”; “I take some of the stuff she says with a pinch*

of salt...and some with a rueful humour, because I think, 'bloody hell, you didn't do that for me!'"

4.2 Main theme 2: Missing Siblings

An only-child is defined by the absence of siblings. How do only-children experience this absence? Is it possible to miss something we have never had and to experience it as a kind of loss? The absence of siblings emerged as a main theme with three sub-themes around the meaning that this gap in their lives had for the participants.

4.2.1. Sub-theme: Being Part of a Group

Both Rachel and Susanne express intense feelings of loss around their childhood in general, including a sense that the presence of siblings would have made life less difficult. Rachel describes a lack of companionship arising from a combination of family circumstances: *"It was not easy to have a friend...and I don't think that was so much because I was an only-child....but because I was different."* *"And it would have been great to have a brother or a sister to be able to go out because I had no friends on that estate and I went to school with people who lived so far away.....it was just like purgatory really."*

The idea of a sister was powerfully attractive – as a passport to a social or sociable life and to being part of a family set-up where children were noticed and valued. She recalls an incident when she and a friend fell over on some ice and the parental concern devoted to her friend seemed to accentuate all that was missing in Rachel's life: *"... and her parents made such a fuss and...were kind and paid her attention and it was like, where was anybody paying me any attention?"*; *"I was extremely jealous of people with sisters."* Rachel had sensed - in contrast to popular thinking - that the

presence of a sibling would have given her more (rather than less) of the adult attention she craved.

Susanne also responded strongly when asked if she had wished for siblings:

"Always. Always thought, 'Why haven't I got a brother or sister?'" Something of her vulnerability as a child and a feeling of being exposed comes through in her words:

"When you're an only-child, you've got nobody to hide behind.....nobody to hide behind."

Adam, too, while not having wished for siblings – *"it didn't really occur to me"* - is aware of that sense of being in some way exposed, of missing out in not being part of a group: *"Whereas the only-child is not...one of anything, except a sort of two adults and child type of triangle..... You're not really part of..... a sibling group."* Both Adam and Susanne express some level of discomfort as a child arising from not being part of a group of siblings – a sense of missing, amongst other things, an opportunity to experience some of the solidarity and security that comes from being in a group.

As a child, Christine had no sense of missing out: *"I sailed through my childhood.....I was never in and I was always out playing, I was always out playing with other kids."*

She had a large extended family and remembers Sunday lunches and holidays spent with *"a whole bigger clan."* She felt no desire or need for siblings.

However, this is changing in adulthood. There is some sense of loss, despite the existence of *"a great network of friends"* and her extended family: *"I've felt it more...as I've got older and going through, you know, relationship break up, that's when I've felt it."* She goes on: *"... yes, I've got loads of cousins, but I don't think it's*

the same bond as some of my friends who've got...with their sisters and brothers and even though they might...fight like cat and dog, when the chips are down, you know...that you've got family, and being single and not having any children and not having any brothers and sisters, that I think, is a ...is sometimes a challenge for me, especially when Iyou know, with what I see in my job and, you know, while I try not to think about death and dying, you do wonder if, unless I meet somebody, who's going to be there?" Her words suggest a sense of anticipatory loss and existential isolation, but it seems as if she is touching on, rather than exploring, some difficult thoughts and feelings.

Adam expresses some sense of loss as an adult – the absence of someone who knows and has shared his past: *"There's nobody to talk to...who was there"* and *"It feels quite lonely....or it's kind of internalised, the memories that I have and I can't really check them out."* Memories of the past, because they are not truly shared, can't seem to find a proper place in the present. Being 'internalised', it feels that they are elusive, almost unreal.

4.2.2. Sub-theme: Rivalry, conflict and other learning opportunities

Two participants identified the absence of conflict as something missing from their own childhood and something they had learned to deal with when they had their own children. Susanne had been keen to avoid having only one child, but was initially quite startled by the 'squabbling' between her three: *"And, as an only-child, I had no rivalry. I didn't know about rivalry until I had my children. I thought, what on earth is going on?"*

Adam did not set out to avoid having an only-child, but having three children has brought a sense of valuing some of the more 'chaotic' side of family life: *"...so I think*

my ideas about what a family, a good family or something like that, is supposed to be like, I think they've shifted...Not that my...not that being the only-child family was a bad thing...but there's lots of good things about other kinds of families where there might be more...you know, stuff going on generally speaking...whether it's emotional stuff or just people running about or whatever it is, just general chaotic stuff..." He speculates about his own adult responses to his wife's family dynamics, linking his responses to lack of familiarity with the 'chaotic stuff' of family life – or lack of 'rehearsal' in his own upbringing: *"So I think I didn't get that rehearsal really within the family anyway. But I can see it in other people's families, it's happening all the time. And for me, it's almost like a comedy, but I think that's probably just me...being defensive about it..."*

4.2.3. Sub-theme: An adult world

The idea of growing up too soon and becoming a kind of honorary adult is quite prominent in the literature. Only two participants in my study identified a sense of being in some way and to some extent a 'little adult'.

Alan and Susanne described very different childhoods but both identified a sense of fitting into an adult world. Susanne was *"always hearing adult conversations when I would stay with my dad"*. She played an 'adult role' when she became a carer for her mother when she was fifteen.

Adam described his childhood as *"very...adult as well"*: *"I wasn't...you know, capering around with my brothers or sisters sort of thing causing chaos."* He says: *"...somehow I had to be a good boy and...you know...fit in with the adults and not mess around and not do stuff like that."* For me, there is a kind of sadness and sense of loss in these simple, matter-of-fact words.

4.3 Main theme 3: Identity

The master theme of 'Identity' produced two sub-themes: 'Stereotypes' and 'Self-concept'.

4.3.1. Sub-theme: Stereotypes

All four participants felt that the stereotypes associated with the only-child did not apply to them. Only one seemed to show any real interest in the idea of the stereotype.

Both Susanne and Christine identify the stereotype of being spoilt with having material possessions and feel that their own economic circumstances in childhood precluded this: *"I think people think you're spoilt. You're an only child and you've got everything, which isn't true..... So, no, I wasn't spoilt"* (Susanne). Christine says: *"I just think...it is what it is, it's a stereotype and it doesn't fit."* However, Christine almost goes on to transfer the stereotype to those with siblings: *"Looking back.....the kids I grew up with, you know,...some of them were more spoilt, you know...younger boys, first born, last born and all this."*

Adam also rejects the stereotype of the only-child - *"That's not how I am"* - and has a sense that, as a child, he was *"almost the opposite of the ...sort of spoilt brat"* in that he was expected to behave like an adult. But he acknowledges some engagement with the idea of the stereotype: *"I sort of remember feeling a bit, you know, like I've got to stick up for it really."* He talks of wanting to 'challenge' the stereotype demonstrating his own authentic difference from the stereotype - but goes on: *"As well as wanting to challenge it, I kind of laugh at it really"* and *"it's no big deal"*. He goes on to speculate on the possibility of stereotypes operating

unconsciously, wondering if his own views of himself have perhaps been influenced in some way. He wonders about his sense of liking to be alone: *"...maybe that's partly a product of....you know, the messages about only-children that I've internalised about only-children or how people said I appear to be as an only-child."*

Rachel is aware of some unfair assumptions that were made by adults about her own situation but feels that her position was 'hugely complex' and any stereotyping that might have been applied to her as a child was due to other factors besides being an only-child.

4.3.2. Sub-theme: Self-concept

Overall, Christine is unsure how far the only-child factor has contributed to her own sense of self, but concedes that it has played a part. Rachel talks of the difficulty for her in building her own sense of self: *"It's all about the self-concept and you build it by people...they're your mirrors that witness you, value you, feed back to you your conditions of worth stuff...so, if you don't have those mirrors,.....it's harder to form it."* She describes a kind of existential feeling of isolation, a feeling of being adrift in the absence of adult attention and experiencing a kind of *"free for all"*. Yet, even without those important mirrors, she was able, eventually, to turn a 'fragile self-concept' into something more robust and to develop secure attachment despite the 'insecure attachment' and 'avoidant' patterns in childhood. There is a kind of existential assumption of responsibility for her own life – *"I had my own self-drive"* - that has enabled her to make good some of the deficits of childhood, to overcome a fearful sense of isolation and to accept the *"less than ideal"* that life has to offer: *"I'm responsible for my life and you can't look or blame...."*

Susanne has also faced a kind of existential aloneness, a raw sense of enduring adversity alone that has left her with a sense of becoming a 'character'. Adam describes himself as someone who makes friends easily but who likes his own space. A sense of *"keeping something back"* in his friendships seems to be rooted in his only-child experience.

Three participants specifically identified 'resilience' in terms of what they had gained. Susanne talks of resilience and adaptability forged through having to cope alone with her distress in childhood. She feels that she is *"so resilient in some ways"*. She is acutely aware of being an only-child and the way that has shaped her, saying: *"I had to deal with all this myself and I think it's made a character of me."*

Christine talks of 'resilience' and 'resourcefulness' arising from coping with the death of a parent on her own. Adam talks of 'resilience' and 'acceptance' but is unsure about 'strength': *"I sort of think there's a resilience in that actually. I think there is a ...I was going to use the word strength, but I'm not sure about that, but there is a...an acceptance as well...something actually that is positive in a way, I think."* Rachel talks of 'coping mechanisms', 'acceptance' and self-determination: *"I'm responsible for my life."*

Two participants talked of the ability to be alone: *"Being an only-child has given me that...confidence that I quite like my own company...but I can work...I'm quite comfortable in groups..."* (Christine). Adam is perhaps less enthusiastic: *"I don't mind being on my own."* Susanne, on the other hand, says: *"I like being quiet but I don't like being alone."*

Susanne talks of some of the 'benefits' of being an only-child, identifying her ability to 'go with the flow' and 'to adapt quickly' and: *"I think it's helped me to be quite a*

caring person.” Christine talks of being ‘grounded’ and ‘placid’ and feels that there is some connection with being an only-child: “And I can’t say it was the significance of...directly being an only-child, but I think some of the qualities that I developed are as a result of being. But equally other people develop them in different ways, don’t they?”

4.4 Main theme 4: Counselling

All participants made links between counselling and their ‘only-child’ experience. The main theme of ‘Counselling’ seemed to divide into two areas: training and practice.

4.4.1. Sub-theme: Training

Adam embraced the opportunities that were offered: *“It felt like something that would, that was good for me to do, as an only-child, but challenging as well, in many ways, but also because I was an only-child.”* Although apprehensive about the challenges he would face, – challenges to his sense of privacy, and tendency to ‘keep something back’ – he sensed positive possibilities: *“I’ll need to be opening up a little bit more.....so this is...whoa.....but I suppose also I kind of welcomed it.”* The training and personal development work seemed to fulfil expectations: *“It wasn’t a.....overly scary or difficult experience. It felt like it was, you know, almost what was needed.”* I sensed that he felt a kind of relief, almost liberation, in finding something life-enhancing that had previously been missing. He feels as if the process helped him *“to develop a deeper relationship with people”*.

Susanne also found that training gave her something valuable in terms of personal development, enabling her to be more open: *“It was all about a person-centred way of being – Carl Rogers and all that. It suited me and I was able to open up and talk*

about things much more openly.” Previously she had not confided in anyone, no matter how painful her experiences had been: “I’ve been very, very quiet about my background over the years but when I did the counsellor training, I think I opened up more than I thought I would. I felt like I was on a journey.”

Neither Christine nor Rachel talked about the attractions of counsellor training – apart from Christine feeling a general sense of having the “*right way of being to be a counsellor*”. Yet both identified some powerful learning. For Christine, conditions of worth came into sharp focus: “*....when you do your training and you....some of the things you recognise, the traits....you know, I wrote a lot about people pleasing.... and conditions of worth and being a daddy’s girl.*” The personal development work in training helped her to realise that her relationship of thirty years “*had run its course*” – and to act on that insight.

For Rachel, training was almost a natural progression from her early interest as a child in “*all sorts of psychological stuff*”. It seems to have helped her to make sense of her early life: “*But, latterly, I understood so much – especially through training and theory.* She goes on: “*I’m now an adult looking back with all this counsellor training.*”

4.4.2 Sub-theme: Practice

All participants talked of the importance of keeping their own experiences (including any ideas arising from being an only-child) separate from whatever clients were bringing to therapy. Rachel specifically linked this to what she had learned as an only-child: “*I suppose part of my learning as an only-child is you don’t project your stuff onto people...you know, you keep your stuff away.*” Also, she recognises that she has dealt with issues of her own that might otherwise intrude: “*so I’m not aware of the only-child thing in as much as I think I’m OK with it, that it doesn’t tip me in one*

way or another.” At present she is working with an only-child client and describes, tentatively, how her own ‘only-child’ experience might to some extent enhance her work with this client, might prompt her to: “.....ask a different question, have a curiosity about something that is something that they may not be aware of, but still following their lead.....they might make a different connection.”

Adam is conscious of the need to resist assumptions or a temptation to identify with clients who may be only-children: *“It’s hanging onto them as the individual only-child who maybe has a very different experience to the one that I had. But it’s certainly there in my mind.”* Sometimes there are echoes and feelings of recognition such as when only-child clients talk about ‘confidence’ and ‘esteem’. It feels *“a bit like familiar territory”* and he reminds himself: *“This is them. It’s not me.”* Often, he is aware of differences when clients with siblings are talking; he notes contrasts with the calmness of his own experience: *“...things happening which are out of my experience of family.....This will pull me up as well.....I think, yes, this is something ...very different to what I experienced. So I think it’s there....it’s there all the time.”*

Christine, a bereavement counsellor, states that she often does not know whether clients are only-children or not. However, she does go on to say of her only-child experience and her counselling practice: *“I mean....I think it helps me to empathise with ...people... who haven’t got a significant group of family they can rely on..... but it’s not...it doesn’t impact me in any way.”* She adds: *“When I’m working with people who...haven’t got anybody in their life, haven’t got brothers and sisters and are quite sort of isolated... I do think, oh...it does resonate, but not...you know, I can’t allow it to impact anyway because it’s their frame of reference.”*

Like Adam and Rachel, Christine is aware of resonance with some client material but very clear about the need to keep this separate and remain within the client's perceptual world. Besides issues of isolation, she notices similarities with clients who feel *"the weight of that responsibility"* – that is to say the burden of responsibility she assumed for her father in his last years, a responsibility that could not be shared with a brother or sister.

Susanne makes strong links between her present work with families and children and her own painful childhood – in general, rather than specifically in terms of being an only-child. She seems very much to see her work in terms of the 'wounded healer': *"....the intuitive side of me could actually understand and be empathic with these young ones who were really upset and in pain. So, I think you get to the point as the hurt and wounded one where you can actually help."* It seems, too, as if her own reluctance or inability to confide in others as a child has given her a kind of heightened, protective sense of a child's right to privacy: *"....they may never, ever open up. I never push children.....it's got to be safe to come out and they've got to be able to feel that safety."* There seem to be echoes from her own childhood.

Susanne and Adam both mention links between their only-child experience and the satisfaction they derive from their counselling practice. Susanne talks of offering something distilled from her experience and ability to empathise, but also says that she feels 'fulfilled' to do so. Adam continues the theme of going deeper that he had welcomed in training: *"I've come to the idea that what it's about is emotional connections, that's what it's about and I think as an only-child, that's attractive, that's an attractive thing."* He makes a specific link between the drive towards emotional connections and the fact that he is an only-child. A sense of valuing the counselling relationship comes across in his words. Although conscious that he is being more

adventurous in exploring deeper feelings, he is aware also of doing this in a kind of controlled environment within the counselling room. It is: ...*"still a sort of safe....safe way, in a way, to engage in strong and perhaps difficult emotions."* It is almost as if he wonders if he has, after all, strayed so very far from his calm, comfortable upbringing. He welcomes the mutuality of counselling. As well as helping the client: *"...there's something for me in this as well, definitely."*

4.5 Summary of findings

Each participant has a clear sense of their own life experience in terms of being an only-child. It is an important aspect of who they are, even if the individual meaning they attach to their experience indicates a rich diversity of personal interpretation so that, at times, the connecting thread in their narratives seems difficult to discern. My strong sense, after concluding the interviews and the analysis, is that being an only-child is a deeply significant part of each participant's sense of self.

Chapter Five

Discussion

5.1 The gap between literature and experience

My findings did not reflect the dominance of stereotypes and archetypes identified in the literature – spoilt, overprotected, lacking social skills etc.(Sorensen, 2008).

Neither did my participants exhibit any of the emotional responses to those stereotypes that feature prominently in the literature. Indeed, the gulf between literature and lived experience is striking in this small study. All participants believe that there is stereotyping of the only-child; all identify the primary component of the stereotype in terms of being spoilt; and all believe it to be inaccurate in their own case. Yet, belief in the inaccuracy of an unflattering perception does not translate into an emotional response, say of anger or a strong sense of injustice (although Adam acknowledged some desire to ‘challenge’ it). Perhaps, also, there is some implicit resentment when Christine, in rejecting the stereotype for herself, (possibly) projects the stereotype onto other birth orders, but that may be taking the interpretative part of my analysis outside the scope of my study.

The Adlerian (1960) premise of 200% parental attention in childhood, which seems to be influential in the formation of the ‘spoilt’ stereotype, simply does not apply in three of the four accounts given by my participants. Two felt a painful absence of parental attention and the third wondered whether there could perhaps have been more attention. Where the idea of 200% attention does, arguably, apply - in the account given by Christine – it is not experienced as something that might ‘spoil’ her development. Instead, it is experienced in a nurturing, life-enhancing and

empowering way that seems to support some of the contentions of Sandler (2013) and others trying to lobby for more positive images for the only-child.

Even if participants are not offended by stereotypes or engaged in a debate about those stereotypes, it is my sense and belief, based on lived experience, that their existence must affect the way only-children perceive themselves as well as the way others perceive them. Sorensen's research (2008) seems to support this view and yet most participants make no link between stereotyping and their own sense of self. Only one participant (Adam) seems to engage with the idea, talking about the possibility that he may have 'internalised' the views of others as well as feeling inclined to 'challenge' the stereotype.

In my encounters with participants, I did not experience any sense of the relevance of an archetype. As discussed in 2.2, Sorensen (2008) offers her model of an only-child archetype tentatively, as a set of characteristics that are likely to relate to the lived experience of only-children. This is rooted in qualitative research and yet it did not seem applicable in my study. Certainly, some of the elements were recognisable: a lack of a sense of connectedness (Adam); issues around responsibility (all participants); a need for personal space (Adam); the experience of shame (Rachel, Susanne). However, these individual elements were very far from comprising a 'set' for any of the participants.

5.2 Counselling

In terms of counselling practice, my participants seemed to endorse Stewart's findings (2004) that labelling or thinking in terms of archetypes or prototypes is unhelpful for practitioners. I noted (and preferred) Adam's emphasis on the importance of hanging onto 'the individual only-child', being attuned to elements of a

client's sense of his or her 'onliness' and separating his own sense of 'familiar territory'. It seems to suggest a person-centred approach that is more conducive to achieving relational depth (Mearns, 1996).

I was also struck by Rachel's subtle, nuanced 'take' on counselling an only-child, using her awareness of her own experience in a tentative way, being sensitive to echoes while remaining very much in the client's frame of reference. She talks of 'curiosity' borne of personal experience. It is a long way from the world of archetypes and defining characteristics. It seems much closer to the 'as-if' quality of empathy (Mearns & Thorne with McLeod, 2013), combining an ability to 'bracket off' personal experience while, paradoxically, allowing that experience to heighten the counsellor's own ability to 'walk alongside' the client.

Counsellor training proved to be a powerful experience for all participants and I wondered if there was scope for further research into the meaning of this training experience for only-children. Is there a link between what may be experienced as 'missing' in only-children's experience and something that is to be found in the intensity of most training programmes? Adam seemed to make this connection, finding something 'powerfully attractive' for the only-child in the opportunity to relate at a deep level. Yet, other participants did not talk in these terms and, again, it seemed difficult to identify any unifying 'only-child' theme in their responses on the subject of counsellor training. Nevertheless, I was left with a sense that each participant's experience during training had, to some extent and in some way, ameliorated some of the more negative aspects of their only-child experience: dissolving conditions of worth (Christine); achieving a profound, intellectual understanding (Rachel); making a deeper connection (Adam); and a realisation that early distress could be turned into a source of strength (Susanne).

5.3 Personal resonances

In trying to make sense of my findings, I am aware that Husserl (1927) believes that we can only reach the essence of a phenomenon if we rigorously examine our own experience of the world in relation to that phenomenon. I have assessed the data, partly at least, in the context of my own emotional and intellectual responses to the material as well as in the context of published literature. There is no doubt that the theme of 'responsibility' has a particular resonance for me on an emotional level. I am reminded of the intensity of feeling responsible – 'completely responsible' (Adam) - for the happiness of parents in later life that three of my participants describe so movingly. Above all, there is a sense of seeking the impossible, taking on responsibility for another's happiness in a quest that is really doomed to failure as we strive to negate or compensate for the effects of old age and death. There is a sense, too, of a futile attempt to compensate for the other children that our parents did not have, as expressed by Christine in the strength of her longing not to disappoint her parents.

I share also the sense of sadness expressed by Adam as he reflects on being the only keeper of family memories. It is part of the journey from being the only 'child' to the only surviving member of the birth family that most only-children will travel. The absence of someone who understands and (at least, partially) shares our story is indeed a 'large absence'. Conversely, the only child may be fortunate to miss the intensely destabilising experience of invalidation that occurs, according to Rowe (2007), when siblings have conflicting memories of a shared past. And, for me, this last sentence expresses some of the limiting aspects of discussions about only-children and their missing siblings: the conversation is constantly pulled back by an 'at least' thought: 'at least' they didn't have to endure the pain of sibling rivalry; 'at

least' they didn't have to share their toys; 'at least' they didn't have to fight for parental attention..... And yet, this pulling back seems to miss an important aspect of how the only-child him/herself experiences the absence. By offering a sensible, consolatory kind of counter-balance it almost seems to diminish the only-child by claiming that s/he has been fortunate to escape from some of the richness and complexity – what Adam terms 'the chaotic stuff' – of life.

Returning to the theme of something missing and 'a large absence', I wondered again about the experience of missing something we have never had. I believe that we can indeed miss what we have never had and I think that the absence of siblings can be felt as a kind of unacknowledged loss throughout life. Julian Barnes expresses his own sense of missing something that he believes was never present: *"I don't believe in God, but I miss him"* (Barnes, 2008, p.1). Presumably, these words suggest a kind of longing (for faith), a longing heightened by a feeling of being excluded from something important. For me, and, I sense, for my participants, the desire for siblings is a similar kind of longing: it is heightened (if not caused) by a sense of exclusion, a sense of being cut off from something experienced by others. In a society where there is widespread idealisation of the family, we only-children are aware that our own small family group may be found in some way deficient.

5.4 An existential perspective

In existential terms, I am conscious of my participants having a kind of heightened sense of the isolation that, ultimately, faces all of us, no matter how close our relationships. Perhaps the only-child is better prepared, more practised at confronting the fact of being alone, more able to show the emotional maturity that Winnicott associates with the capacity to be alone. Erich Fromm goes further,

stating: *“Paradoxically, the ability to be alone is the condition for the ability to love”* (Fromm, 1963, p.93). I am reminded of Susanne’s words: *“there’s nobody to hide behind...nobody to hide behind”*, and it is as if the early necessity of facing life alone has strengthened her by revealing a truth that may not be revealed so early to others. This is the ‘truth’, in existential terms, as described by Yalom (1991, p.12) – that we are born alone and die alone. Perhaps the only-child has had more opportunity to come to terms with this truth and consequently has a greater sense of the *“tension between our awareness of isolation and our wish for contact, protection and to be part of a larger whole”* (Yalom, 1991, p.10). I felt that, in their very different ways, each participant had wrestled with a sense of being alone even if they would perhaps not adopt my interpretation of existential isolation. I am thinking, particularly, of Susanne whose strong religious faith was evident throughout our interview and who would, presumably – this was not explored - have a very different view of the sense of isolation that she experienced in childhood.

Still, reflecting in existential terms, I had a strong sense that each participant had accepted the responsibility for shaping one’s own life that comes with the ‘given’ of freedom. Each participant, either explicitly or implicitly, has become in Sartre’s terms (cited in Yalom, 1991) the ‘author’ of his or her own life, accepting personal responsibility for the choices they have made and the way they have lived (and are living) their lives. Victor Frankl (1985, p.98) reflects on existential responsibility: *“Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”* So, the tendency to accept responsibility even, as in Adam’s case, for those things over which we have no real control, may find expression in a readiness also to take full responsibility for our lives.

I was left with a strong sense of the way in which each participant's story was marked by insight and an awareness of decision-making in the way their lives had been shaped. There was a complete absence of self-pity or a feeling of being defined by early family circumstances – even when, as in the case of Rachel and Susanne, those circumstances had been particularly difficult. Yet, I was brought back, once again, to the unanswerable question of how much this was attributable to being an only-child. Have other factors been just as influential – or even more influential - in producing the unflinching narratives of my participants? Still, I felt convinced by the link that participants make between only-child experience and what amounts to resilience and an ability to confront the existential challenge of freedom.

5.5 Story-telling

“Each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through and in us.” (Sachs, 1985 as quoted in Sugarman, 2004, p.69)

As counsellors, most of us believe in the value of story-telling both as a means of understanding experience and as a therapeutic aid to personal growth. Narrative therapy is recognised as a counselling approach in its own right, an approach influenced, initially, by Michel Foucault (McLeod, 2003). McLeod (2003) talks of personal experience and reality being ‘constructed’ through the process of telling stories. Shaping the narrative becomes an aspect of the client taking responsibility for his or her own life, facing up to existential freedom or, as characterised by Carl Rogers (1951), taking the opportunity to write or rewrite the narrative of identity.

As I interviewed participants, each one seemed to make sense of experience through telling his or her story. And story-telling was what they were being asked to

do, having only one hour to encapsulate a life's experience and, just to add to the difficulty of the task, trying to view past, present and future through the lens of what it means to be an only-child. It was demanding.

I was also conscious of the transience and the nuances of oral story-telling, how the stories we tell about ourselves are fluid and changing. Yet my participants' stories would become fixed; for the purposes of this dissertation, they would become a kind of life script to be read and re-read before being analysed. I would then become the narrator of the stories of others. Despite these misgivings, in a final act of reduction and interpretation, I have tried, in the paragraphs that follow, to distil a meaning that I have taken from each story – hoping that this does not do too much injustice to the 'real' narrators of the stories and their complex narratives of identity:

Rachel's story is of an only-child who has used intellectual strength and personal fortitude to compensate for what was missing in her childhood and to create something very different for her own children.

Christine's story is of an only-child who enjoyed a nurturing, sociable upbringing and whose confident sense of self has enabled her to end a relationship lasting more than thirty years and to face life alone – albeit with strong, supportive friendships – in her fifties.

Susanne's story is of an only-child who has developed strength out of childhood adversity and whose religious faith and family of three children have helped her to create a very different life for herself in adulthood.

Adam's story is of an only-child who has reached a deep understanding of himself in relation to being an only-child, an understanding that seems evident in a calm

acceptance of what may have been missing, combined with an appreciation of the more populated family life he now enjoys as an adult.

As I approach the conclusion of this dissertation, trying to understand where the process has left me, it is the complexity and humanity of these stories that linger as a powerful memory.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

6.1 Limitations

The project has taken place within very precise parameters – with a relatively small word count and a relatively short time frame. The task is, therefore, by its very nature, subject to strict limitations and on a small scale. By contrast, the subject seems vast, complex and, at times, elusive. I have asked participants to capture their subjective sense of what it means to be an only-child. As they reflected over many years, trying to distil the ‘only-child’ element in their lives and ways of being, I was aware of the difficulties in this process of disentangling. As one participant said, *“It’s who I am.”*

I am also conscious of Smith et al.’s (2009) advice to a ‘newcomer’ to research (as I am), to obtain a group that is ‘pretty homogenous’. Despite all being only-children, experienced counsellors, white and of middle age, I did not experience my group as being particularly homogenous – at least, in outlook, personality and experience. I was initially troubled by the fact that two participants had been brought up by only one parent and this seemed to preclude some of the dominant themes in the existing literature, that of the sometimes intense nature of the two parents/one child relationship. Indeed, in a single parent household with one child, the ‘only’ part of ‘only-child’ is diluted in that the other family member is the ‘only-adult’. There are two ‘onlies’. Still, I hoped that those differences might prove to be a source of strength as well as a limitation and I now believe this to have been the case.

6.2 Further research

I feel as if the link between only-child experience and the impact of counsellor training might justify further research. The research could usefully explore ways in which counsellor training may encourage understanding of an only-child's sense of something 'missing' that seems to feature in each narrative.

Despite my resistance to any treatment of only-children as a separate category – ironic in the context of my choice of my topic – I believe that qualitative research into the real lived experience of only-children may in fact serve as something of a corrective to the prevalence of stereotypes. It might even facilitate 'knowledge of the other' (McLeod, 2011, p.3) which could be useful in terms of self-awareness of trainees and useful, too, for counsellors and counselling tutors, leading them beyond stereotyped views of their clients or students.

6.3 Coming full circle

As explained, my participants' lack of engagement with ideas around stereotyping was entirely unexpected and gave me pause for thought. Mostly, I felt encouraged that only-children – or at least, 'my' four only-children – seemed to treat harsh stereotypes with a kind of dismissive shrug. I reflected on the way that I, along with so many researchers and writers, seemed to have a rather less healthy response, feeling some indignation about the kind of casual prejudice that surrounds this subject. Initially, I felt a little chastened by the views of participants. Perhaps I was taking things too personally? Yet, at the end of this study, I find myself returning to the feeling that, even if prejudice does not have a direct or measurable impact on the lives of only-children, it is still 'wrong' in more than one sense of that word: both inaccurate and morally unacceptable.

I am pleased that an initial hope – that my findings might represent a challenge to the stereotype – was, in my view, fulfilled. Ideas around a stereotype or archetype seem irreconcilable with the people I encountered and the narratives I heard. Above all, I feel that my participants have done me a favour – in addition to the huge personal favour of agreeing to participate – by leading me away from the well-worn path of stereotyping, thereby enabling me to come far closer to the lived experience and felt-sense of participants, even if I seem now to be returning to some first thoughts. McLeod states that phenomenology requires that we leave the familiar places where we are comfortable in our theories and beliefs to travel out on a journey of discovery, returning to those familiar places and seeing them in a new light:

“We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time”

Little Gidding (T.S.Eliot, 1974)

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Appendix 1

Research Advert

RESEARCH ON THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING AN ONLY-CHILD

I'm looking for:

COUNSELLORS WHO WERE BROUGHT UP WITHOUT SIBLINGS

I am an MA in Clinical Counselling student at Chester University carrying out a research project on the experience of being an 'only-child'. I hope to interview counsellors who are only-children to explore their sense of the way in which this particular aspect of their identity may have shaped and influenced their lives – and any insights they may have gained through practice.

Participation will involve a recorded interview (about one hour long) and possibly some follow-up questions for clarification or further exploration.

THANK YOU

Caroline Fletcher

Email:

Appendix 2

Consent form

M. A. in Clinical Counselling Research
University of Chester

Consent Form: Audio/Digital Recording of Interview

Name: Caroline Fletcher

Title: Adult Reflections on Being an Only-Child

Ihereby give consent for the details of a written transcript based on an audio/digital recorded interview with me and..... .. to be used in preparation and as part of a research dissertation for the M.A. in Clinical Counselling at the University of Chester. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and that all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the research data. I further understand that the transcript may be seen by Counselling Tutors and the External Examiner for the purpose of assessment and moderation. I also understand that all these individuals are bound by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

I understand that I will have access to the transcribed material and would be able to delete or amend any part of it. I am aware that I can stop the interview at any time or ultimately withdraw the interview, without giving a reason or explanation, at any point before data analysis has begun. Upon satisfactory completion of the M.A. in Clinical Counselling the recording will be securely destroyed. The transcripts and related data will be securely stored for a period of five years, by me, the researcher, and then destroyed.

Excerpts from the transcript will be included in the dissertation. A copy of the dissertation will be held in the Department of Social Studies and Counselling and may be made available electronically through Chester Rep, the University's online research repository.

Without my further consent some of the material may be used for publication and/or presentations at conferences and seminars. Every effort will be made to ensure complete anonymity.

Finally I confirm I have read and understood the attached Information Sheet and was given the opportunity for further explanation by the researcher. I believe I have been given sufficient information about the nature of this research, including any possible risks, to give my informed consent to participate.

Signed
[Participant].....

Name- Please
Print.....

Date
.....
...

Signed **[Researcher]**
.....

Name **Please**
Print.....

Date.....

Appendix 3

Research Information Sheet for Participants

Title of dissertation

Adult Reflections on Being an Only-Child

About me:

I am a third year postgraduate student at Chester University reading for an MA in Clinical Counselling.

My research:

My aim is to explore in-depth the experience of being an 'only child' as seen from the perspective of adult only-children. I am interested in exploring the significance that different individuals attach to the experience with the focus on the individual's felt sense and lived-experience – rather than looking at the disadvantages and advantages of growing up without siblings. What is the personal sense of the ways in which being an only-child has shaped and continues to shape the way in which individuals view themselves and the world?

What does participating in this research mean?

There will be a recorded interview (about one hour long) which will offer the opportunity to explore your experience of being an only child in adulthood and childhood. The interview will be held at a mutually convenient, safe and confidential location:

The interview questions will consist of the following:

- 4 Describe your relationship with your parents as you grew up? How was this relationship affected by the fact that you were an only-child? Did you wish that you had siblings? How did you develop social and emotional relationships with other children? What was your awareness of external perceptions (and negative stereotypes) of the 'only-child'? What is your adult sense of and reaction to negative stereotypes of the only-child?
- 5 How do you feel that the experience of growing up without siblings affected your development of a self-concept?
- 6 In thinking about your relationships as an adult, what significance do you attach to the fact that you were raised as an only-child? What personal qualities (positive and negative) do you attribute to the fact

that you were raised as an only-child? As an adult, do you wish that you had siblings?

- 7 How do you think your ideas about the concept of family have been informed by the fact of being an only-child?
- 8 Have there been times in counselling sessions (either as counsellor or client) when the fact of being an only-child (either counsellor or client) has been directly in your awareness or even played a part in the dialogue?

Inclusion criteria

- Adults who are 'only-children'
- Qualified counsellors who feel sufficiently grounded in their experience to participate in the research
- Counsellors who have access to supervision to ensure that they have the necessary support
- Fluent English speakers
- Adults aged over 30 years

Participants' rights

Your participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any point before data analysis has begun, without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself.

You will be offered the opportunity to read and agree the transcript of your interview, and at that point will be giving final consent for the data to be used in the study.

Once final consent has been given and the analysis begins, you will not be able to withdraw or change the material, as the data will have added into the group data set, and it will no longer be possible to isolate it.

If you are unhappy with any aspect of the process, I would ask you to contact me in the first instance at:

If the outcome is not satisfactory, you can contact my research supervisor, Dr Peter Gubi:

If the issue still cannot be resolved, please contact the Head of Social Studies and Counselling Meriel D'Artrey:

What are the potential risks?

It is possible that exploring this subject may raise issues that cause distress. If so, I would hope that you would be able to use the support of your supervisor as

necessary. I will ensure that you are able to access the list of BACP registered counsellors if you wish to do so.

Confidentiality

I will ensure that your anonymity is protected at every stage of the project by allocating a pseudonym to all information about you. Any information that may identify you will not be included in the final dissertation. Verbatim sections of the interview will only be used with your consent.

Benefits of the research

I hope that the study may help participants to reflect in depth on their own experience and to enter more fully into the 'only child' client's frame of reference. In trying to capture some of the complexity of the lived experience, I want to move away from some of the social stereotypes surrounding the only child, looking beyond the debate about advantages or (more usually) disadvantages of living without siblings.

What will happen to the results?

The results of my research will form part of my MA dissertation which will be submitted to Chester University and which may form part of other works which are put forward for publication. The dissertation may be made available electronically through ChesterRep, the University's online research repository.

Data protection

I will ensure that all data is stored securely in accordance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act. All the material will be anonymised through pseudonyms. The recordings will be transferred onto my PC, encrypted and password protected. The transcribed interviews will also be saved on a USB stick which will be kept in a locked drawer.

Ethics

Working with my supervisor, I will conduct the research in line with the BACP Ethical Framework and Chester University's Research Governance Handbook. I have submitted my research proposal to the University's Ethics Committee who have given their approval for the project to go ahead. I intend to keep ethical considerations in mind throughout the project with the assistance of my supervisor.

Contact details:

Caroline Fletcher

Appendix 4

Literature search: chart of search terms

Only-child and	Stereotypes and	Counselling and	Identity
“siblings” or “parents” or “parental attention” or “attachment theory” or “birth order”	“archetypes” or “prototypes” or “labelling” or “little emperors” or “one-child policy” or “spoilt child”	“psychotherapy” or “counsellor training” or “only-child clients” or “only-child counsellor” or “personal development”	“ self-concept” or “self-awareness” or “mirroring” or “sense of self” or “existential freedom” or “existential isolation”